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Review

Idiosyncrasies in decoding mitochondrial genomes

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ABSTRACT

Mitochondria originate from the α-proteobacterial domain of life. Since this unique event occurred, mitochondrial genomes of protozoans, fungi, plants and metazoans have highly derived and diverged away from the common ancestral DNA. These resulting genomes highly differ from one another, but all present-day mitochondrial DNAs have a very reduced coding capacity. Strikingly however, ATP production coupled to electron transport and translation of mitochondrial proteins are the two common functions retained in all mitochondrial DNAs. Paradoxically, most components essential for these two functions are now expressed from nuclear genes. Understanding how mitochondrial translation evolved in various eukaryotic models is essential to acquire new knowledge of mitochondrial genome expression. In this review, we provide a thorough analysis of the idiosyncrasies of mitochondrial translation as they occur between organisms. We address this by looking at mitochondrial codon usage and tRNA content. Then, we look at the aminoacyl-tRNA-forming enzymes in terms of peculiarities, dual origin, and alternate function(s). Finally we give examples of the atypical structural properties of mitochondrial tRNAs found in some organisms and the resulting adaptive tRNA-protein partnership.

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1. Introduction

In most eukaryotes, mitochondrial (mt) translation is of bacterial type but a certain degree of variation and adaptation has occurred during evolution. While the endosymbiotic genome likely encoded all components of the translational apparatus, genome wide analysis shows that mt DNA has kept only a minimal set of elements (mainly genes encoding a few respiratory chain proteins and rRNAs), but differences can be observed between species [1]. Nevertheless, mitochondria have retained a functional translational apparatus, meaning that almost all genes encoding mt ribosomal proteins, aminoacyl-tRNA synthetases (aaRSs), tRNAs and other translation-related factors were transferred to the nuclear genome. Once translated in the cytosol, these missing mt-encoded products must be imported into the organelle.

Evolutionarily, most components of the mt translation machinery have a bacterial origin and can often be experimentally replaced by bacterial homologs. However, rapid evolution of the mt genomes, numerous post-endosymbiotic lateral gene transfer events (*e.g.* Ref. [2]) as well as an increased flexibility of mt enzymes and tRNAs can make these replacements difficult. For instance, in the case of mt tRNAs from metazoans, significant changes in tertiary structure likely require adaptation of the mt translation machinery (*e.g.* [3]). In addition, nucleus-encoded proteins and RNAs of eukaryotic origin, including many tRNAs, are imported into mitochondria where they also cause divergence from the bacterial "norm" of translation [4]. This presents major drawbacks when trying to establish eukaryotic models for the study of mt functions. The experimental advantages of using eukaryotic models such as the yeast *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*, the land plant *Arabidopsis thaliana* or human cells to study mt dysfunction (in particular respiratory dysfunction) are evident, but require a thorough understanding of the idiosyncrasies of mt translation as they occur between organisms.

To this end, we sought to highlight here unconventional properties of mt translation from different kingdoms of the eukaryotic tree of life (protozoans, fungi, plants and metazoans). We address

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this by looking at mt codon usage, and mitochondrion-encoded tRNAs and their peculiarities. We also describe strategies used by species to express mt aaRSs or other aa-tRNA-forming enzymes, as well as the alternative roles of these enzymes.

2. Alternate codon usage

Of the ways in which mt translation differs from the bacterial or cytosolic (cyto) processes, the use of unique genetic codes may be the most familiar. The aaRSs, which determine what tRNAs (and anticodons) are paired with which amino acid (aa), are the molecular embodiment of the genetic code. Once formed, and if recruited by an elongation factor, the identity of the aa moiety of an aminoacyl-tRNA is no longer recognized. This may sometimes cause missense mutations, but it also allows suppression and codon reassignment, which occur at a higher rate in metazoan mitochondria for example. Codon usage is tied to tRNA availability: either the tRNA pool drives codon usage, or codon usage is determined by other factors and changes in the tRNA pool follow suit. Studying codon usage gives considerable insight into which tRNAs are used in mitochondria, and sometimes into their origin.

The number of tRNA genes encoded in the mt genome among related species follows broad trends, with many exceptions (see below for more details, [5–7]). In protozoan species that have been extensively studied, it is typical for the mt genome to have lost several tRNA-coding genes. The loss of mt tRNA genes must therefore be compensated by the import of nucleus-encoded tRNA species [4,8]. In Metazoa, the situation is more complex, but in higher Metazoa the trend is toward the conservation of a single mitochondrion-encoded tRNA for every aa, except leucine and serine, which have two tRNAs. In both these groups, codon usage seems likely to be biased toward those synonymous codons, which can be decoded by a single tRNA for every codon box (a codon box is defined as the set of four triplets sharing the first two nucleotides), which explains the presence of two isoacceptors for Leu and for Ser. While Arg normally also occupies two codon boxes, it has been recently demonstrated that the rare Arg AGA/AGG codons are not used. Instead, a very elegant work from Temperley et al. [9] demonstrated that, in the presence of these codons (and in the absence of any possible $tRNA^{Arg}$), with human mt ribosomes a frameshift occurs resulting in the positioning of a universal UAG stop codon. In plant mitochondria, broadly speaking, between 30 and 50% of the mitochondrion-encoded tRNA genes are well conserved, and sometimes present in more than one copy per codon. This is coupled with the import of several nucleus-encoded tRNA species [8]. How this may influence their codon usage in relation to Protozoa and Metazoa is a complex question.

Pressures defining synonymous codon usage can be pre-translational, such as mRNA secondary structure, abundance, and stability [10–12], and such as the GC-content of the genome [13,14]. These pressures can also be post-transcriptional, like repeating synonymous codon usage in order to maximize tRNA recycling [15], or a 5′ stretch of codons enhancing ribosome “ramp up” shortly after initiation [16]. All of these factors as well as the number of tRNAs available for the decoding of mt genes may vary strongly between different species, but all have retained a translational apparatus tuned to the expression of a small number of genes. The most conserved of these are the respiratory chain proteins of which cytochrome *b* (Cytb) and cytochrome *c* oxidase subunit one (Cox1) are the only genes present in all known mt genomes. The proteins encoded by these genes are hydrophobic, at least transiently membrane-bound, and coordinate the binding of cofactors. These characteristics, in particular strong hydrophobicity, have been hypothesized as having selected these proteins for retention of the corresponding genes in the mt DNA. If these proteins are translated from nucleus-encoded genes it will require import of the pre-proteins into mitochondria that can be impeded by their strong hydrophobicity, particularly in trans-membrane helices [17–19].

When comparing codon usage between diverse organisms, the value of each of those codons, whether it codes for an aa, a stop, or a start, does not need to be known in order to gain insights into mt translation. So long as coding DNA sequences are known, large scale surveys of codon usage can serve as a guide for further work, as shown here with a surface plot representation of three genes from ten species (Fig. 1). The coding DNA sequences for Cytb, Cox1 and for the nucleus-encoded cytochrome *c* subunit 1 (Cyt1) were obtained (GenBank, PlasmoDB, PlantGDB), and their codon usage values calculated using available programs (www.GeneInfinity.org; www.kazusa.or.jp/codon/). Trends are sufficiently conserved among different species for those who diverge from this rough consensus to be readily apparent. The relevance of this type of data representation is demonstrable by how it visually flags idiosyncrasies previously described experimentally. For example, the fact that $tRNA^{Leu}_{CAA}$ in *Chlamydomonas reinhardtii* is a nucleus-encoded tRNA mostly present in mitochondria [20], is likely related to the prevalence of TTG codons in Cox1 and Cytb when compared to Metazoa and Protozoa (Fig. 1, dark gray focus circle). In the mt (maxi-circle) genome of *Leishmania major*, some genes such as Cytb have TAG codons in frame, which do not result in a translational stop [21]. It is possible that this is related to the unusual frequency at which TAG codons occur in *L. major* Cytb when compared to the other organisms surveyed (Fig. 1, light gray focus circle). *Marchantia polymorpha*, *C. reinhardtii* and *A. thaliana* all import a significant number of nucleus-encoded tRNAs, which may explain their partial divergence from codon usage patterns seen in Protozoa and Metazoa. Another aspect that might have influenced codon usage in plant mt genomes is the presence of a second endosymbiotic organelle, the chloroplast. When comparing Protozoa and Metazoa, codon usage is surprisingly well conserved between organisms of these phylae, despite significant differences in the extent of mitochondrion-encoded tRNAs and in mt RNA editing patterns. This is apparent when comparing Cox1 and Cytb to the nucleus-encoded Cyt1, which is one of the components of the same respiratory chain complex in which Cytb participates (complex III). The surface plot of codon usage shows significantly more shifts in codon preference between species in Cyt1 (twists and breaks in the intensity ridges perpendicular to the *X*-axis) than in Cox1 and Cytb, despite well-conserved aa content for all three proteins. The survey presented also reveals other trends, which may guide future work.

3. Peculiarities of mitochondrial tRNAs and aminoacyl-tRNA synthetases

3.1. Mitochondrion-encoded versus nucleus-encoded mitochondrial tRNAs

Since genome sequencing has become commonplace, data on complete mt genomes have steadily increased for a wide range of evolutionarily divergent organisms. In theory, bioinformatics tools allow identification of the set of mitochondrion-encoded tRNA genes in each of these organisms. In practice, this is not always an easy task as several parameters may interfere with tRNA identification and with the characterization of the minimal set of tRNA genes required for mt translation to occur. Among them, we can cite: unknown codon/anticodon rules, deviation from the universal genetic code, post-transcriptional modification such as editing that changes the decoding properties of the tRNA molecule, “bizarre” tRNAs with unconventional cloverleaf secondary structure, which can escape detection [22,23]. Nevertheless, it has become clear that the number of mt tRNA genes varies between organisms, and that

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